

A SHORT PODCAST ABOUT THE MEANING OF TECHNIQUE AND SOUND.

When we use the word technique, what do we mean?

In old Greek the word, tekhnikos meant 'pertaining to art'.

The French then adopted it in the early 19th century to mean 'formal practical details in artistic expression' - apparently. From the spelling it is clear that we took on the French word.

The meaning had therefore already been narrowed and split, suggesting that technique involved something exclusively practical, within, of course, what the French referred to as 'artistic expression'. Formal practical details in artistic expression. There you have it, the emergence of the old ying and yang: practical details And artistic expression.

From there it is not a much of a leap for the word to take on the meaning, at least in music, of Mechanical Dexterity. One does not need to imagine why there is a course in French Conservatories called 'Le cours de perfectionnement'! (The translation is lessons in perfecting').

In other words, its meaning no longer relates to art at all.

How many times have you heard someone say that 'he or she has a marvellous technique but is not particularly musical', or some such trivial remark?

One cannot separate technique from expression or from artistic skill and knowledge. The Greeks knew it. We should know it.

A musician who has remarkable mechanical freedom on his or her instrument does not necessarily have a good technique. Mechanical freedom depends on good teaching, on allowing the body to employ economical movements, and on practising challenging pieces rather a lot.

The word technique, however, presupposes a broad knowledge and skills that have little to do with mechanical aptitude.

Does the musician have insight into the structure, the harmony, the modulation, the melodic content, and the counterpoint should there be any? Has he or she the ability to produce legato, the subject of my 3rd podcast? Do they have an internalised all-encompassing view of the work, in other words an interpretation?

To my mind, these are the dimensions that are implicit in the word technique. When one has mastered the above challenges, one might be called an artist, which brings us back to the original meaning of the word, 'tekhnikos', meaning 'pertaining to art'.

On the other subject of this podcast, Sound, there are also misunderstandings.

Musicians are often complimented, and compliment themselves, on the beauty of the sound they produce. This sound is often praised, when all it attests to is a basic sensitivity, as most of us would agree that bashing a piano or scraping the bow across the strings is ugly. We don't need artistry to achieve a minimally tolerable sound.

But sound is not a separate entity, to be found somewhere irrespective of any musical work.

It is not, and should not be, the product of some form of self-involvement, or even, to use a favourite word, narcissism. I am beginning to sound moralistic, so please forgive me. My intention is to differentiate between Sound that has no purpose in conveying meaning, and Sound that, quite to the contrary, has that very purpose. Why are we musicians? Only because we wish to convey meaning. Can one be a musician without this capacity?

A work of music, and an interpretation, are essential to the above definition of sound, before any comment can be made about its beauty. I am not including within the definition of musical sounds a road digger, nor, pace the wonderful composer Ligeti, metronomes, by the way. The sound has to be produced by an individual on an acoustic instrument, and he or she must have a musical intention.

So beautiful sound has to have the attributes of musical intention, of being embedded in an interpretation of a work.

This brings me to the end of the podcast about Technique and Sound.